

T H O M A S V A R G I S H

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## Conrad's "The Secret Sharer": A Private Ethics of Leadership

How can anyone's welfare depend on such as I am?  
—Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*

Structural authority resides in the nexus between the social institution or system—the State, the corporation, the ship, the family—and the constituents of the system, the individuals who comprise it. Those who exercise power in any system, who possess authority, act as the synapses or negotiators between the overall system and its parts. In a corporate system, managers serve as the interface between the general structure and the individuals who work in it. In a legal system the police and officers of the court negotiate between the law and the citizens bound by it. These points of contact are the location of authority within any system. They are always points of tension and often points of conflict. This is so general that in certain systems, like the law which develops through precedent and like healthy corporate and military institutions capable of responding to adversarial challenge, the conflict is often exploited as a device to advance the system itself, to accommodate it to changes in the larger culture.

But what about the people occupying these points of tension and conflict? What happens to the leaders themselves? How do they transcend the static structural authority of their positions to advance their institutions and their individual subordinates. How do they develop from mere rank to charisma? The exercise of charisma depends largely on the leader's ability to embody the values that sustain

authority in the cultural context where it is exercised. These embodiments are often, perhaps always, expressed as personal characteristics. To put it differently, a leader's ability to recognize the authoritative characteristics in his or her own makeup and to translate these into a public identity permits the values to become shared—so that the experience of charisma for both leaders and followers is one of sharing.' This is the most important social function of leadership and it can be used primarily for purposes of charity and social justice or for purposes of national and personal aggrandizement. For better or worse, charisma is a social phenomenon, an experience of sharing. Having acknowledged this broad function of leadership, I now want to leave the larger social sphere and move inward, into the inner dynamic of those who exercise practical authority.

Everyone in a position of responsibility knows from experience that the exercise of practical authority involves tradeoffs and conflicts between the professional (public) and the personal (private) life. From a psychological standpoint the question quickly resolves itself into one of inner conflict, the tension or stress caused by the starvation of the personal self in the interest of social responsibility, whether that responsibility is characterized as religious, or social, or political, or military, or commercial, or corporate, or even familial. The representation of this conflict is a central concern of our greatest literature. Antigone in her long final speech recalls her thwarted desire to become a wife and mother; Brutus acknowledges his inner war between "genius" and "mortal instrument"; Milton's Adam learns what it means to fail to govern where one adores; Dr. Frankenstein withdraws in the face of professional disillusionment; Captain Vere feels paternal love for the person his conception of duty requires him to kill. And in the end these characters do not do well as leaders precisely because they have not resolved the conflict between their public and private identities, their professional functions and their personal needs. We might admire them (Antigone); we might pity them (Vere); we might identify with them (Adam)—but they do not serve us as models of sustainable leadership. For that we need to go to those who, however ethically imperfect, have achieved this inner resolution, like Shakespeare's Henry V, like Stendhal's Napoleon, like Winston Churchill, like Martin Luther King. And more important than a list of successful leaders (over which we might well disagree) will be an understanding of the process of resolution itself, its costs and its returns.

### **Achieving the Resolution: "The Secret Sharer"**

In order to discuss this complex matter clearly and efficiently we need a narrative that deals with the internal conflict between personal and professional authority

and that gives an account of its *successful* resolution as the key to creative leadership. Joseph Conrad's astonishing parable of command and its requirements in "The Secret Sharer" (1910) places the process of inner resolution before us with an immediacy and power unequalled elsewhere in our literature.

By the time he published this story, Conrad had extensive experience of the world of affairs, especially the world of the sea, culminating in a captaincy in the British merchant marine at the age of thirty. Two years later, in 1889, he turned to fiction and in 1994 his career as a seaman ended as the result of a tropical illness suffered in the Belgian Congo. During the sixteen years before "The Secret Sharer" appeared he wrote a number of complex and influential narratives dealing with the ethical and psychological problems of authority and with failures of leadership. Most famous of these include *Heart of Darkness* (1898), *Lord Jim* (1900), and *Nostromo* (1904). In much of this work his attention centers on the mind of the person who appears to be the leader, who wants to think of himself as leader, who sees himself as a failed leader, who has been tested and who has failed due to some dark inner weakness in himself and who dies or who wanders seeking redemption. "The Secret Sharer," however, tells of the successful integration of personal and professional authority, the creative synergy of private and professional aspiration, and this makes it very rare among serious, complex studies of leadership.

The narrator is a young officer who has just been given his first command, to captain a merchant sailing ship back to Britain from the Gulf of Siam. He does not tell us exactly how he received the appointment but the implication is that he possesses connections and a background that would favor him and that place him at a social distance above his officers and the ordinary seamen. Suddenly he finds himself master of an unfamiliar ship in command of officers and a crew who are strange to him. He is absolutely responsible and absolutely isolated, conditions which he feels acutely. As he wanders the ship alone at night, having taken the watch himself—an extraordinary step which he immediately sees as reflecting badly on his leadership—he discovers a naked man clinging to a rope side ladder. He permits the man to climb aboard and listens to his story. The stranger, named Leggatt, becomes the "secret sharer" of the tale. He has a background that brings him into social and psychological alignment with the narrator: his father is a parson in Norfolk and therefore a gentleman; he enjoyed the same prestigious merchant marine schooling as the narrator; and he has served as a ship's officer. The narrator-captain immediately associates Leggatt with himself. But Leggatt is an outlaw, having killed an insubordinate seaman for refusing a crucial order when a storm threatened their ship. The narrator, without making a conscious decision, hides,

feeds, and protects the secret sharer in his cabin until—amid a splendid virtuoso display of high-risk seamanship—he secures his escape.

Conrad's story is exciting as a tale of the sea and profound in its exploration of the psychology of leadership. The narration never explicitly explains this psychology, though the narrator gives pointers in the form of hints couched in abbreviated, oblique "masculine" formulations. But as readers we have constantly before us an intriguing psychological opacity as we try to understand not the sharer (who is plain enough) but the narrator himself. Conrad forces the reader to come to terms with the inner drama by means of this opacity, as if the parable must be understood only by the happy few who have the eyes and ears for it. The technique of veiled meaning forces us to make a positive effort to identify the values of the narrator. Why does he harbor Leggatt? Why does he risk his entire career, his whole future life, to protect someone for whom he has no formal responsibility? Why does he jeopardize his first command? His crew? His ship? To find the answers to these questions as they become more and more pressing the reader must attend urgently to the narrative, must become a kind of co-conspirator, must discover in the process both the pressures and the terrors of leadership. Only in this way will the reader comprehend their ultimate resolution in a triumphant creative performance that guarantees professional because it secures personal success. "The Secret Sharer" enables us to move to the heart of the conflict of public and private demands with a speed and precision unmatched in more abstract (objective, historical, scientific) presentations. Here again literature can show us the actual life which gives birth to whatever authentic authority we will ever know.

The narrator-captain is never named. Nor is his ship. The obvious putative reason for this is of course the security of his reputation, even though he tells the story from a distance of years. The effect of the namelessness, however, is to enlarge the specific history into a kind of parable, a parable of youth and of the acquisition of authority, which the narrator possesses in its preliminary manifestations as the story opens. He has power: he is captain. And he has knowledge: he understands completely the passage from the Gulf of Siam to Britain. He pictures to himself "the coming passage through the Malay Archipelago, down the Indian Ocean, and up the Atlantic. All its phases were familiar enough to me, every characteristic, all the alternatives which were likely to face me on the high seas—everything! . . . except the novel responsibility of command." He has everything, that is, except the ultimate requirements of his authority:

It must be said, too, that I knew very little of my officers. . . . Neither did I know much of the hands forward. All these people had been together for eighteen months or so, and my position was that of the only stranger on board. . . . But what I felt most was my being a stranger to the ship; and if all the truth must be told, I was somewhat of a stranger to myself.<sup>2</sup>

We could say that he has technical knowledge, but not that knowledge of others or of himself that will enable him to achieve a creative authority, one that can reach beyond the regulations, one containing the ability to resolve the public with the private life.

From the opening of the story Conrad has directed our attention to what the narrator knows and what he does not know. The first sentence gives us a hint of what we are in for: “On my right hand there were lines of fishing stakes resembling a mysterious system of half-submerged bamboo fences, incomprehensible in its division of the domain of tropical fishes, and crazy of aspect as if abandoned for ever by some nomad tribe of fishermen now gone to the other end of the ocean; for there was no sign of human habitation as far as the eye could reach” (7). The paragraph goes on to give reinforcing images of the isolation and above all of the opacity hinted at in the introductory sentence. The order of the fishing stakes is “mysterious” and “incomprehensible,” “crazy of aspect”—unless one understands the movement of the fish beneath the surface. But those who do understand that movement are not present to explain it so that if we did wish to understand the surface pattern, its origin and its order, we would have to go beneath the surface and observe a world that contains different values and different forces from those above the water line. This of course is the reader’s assignment, to go beneath the surface of the explicit events to their springs and sources in the narrator’s mind.

We have seen that at the beginning of his journey the narrator feels a stranger on board the ship—a stranger to his crew, to the ship, to himself. He feels acutely the isolation of his situation and asks himself if he will prove worthy of his first command. He anxiously imagines the sea and sky as “spectators” and “judges”; he senses uncomfortably that the stars are a “multitude of celestial bodies staring down at one”; he wonders “how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one’s own personality every man sets up for himself secretly” (8, 9). As he paces the deck alone in the dark he quiets these anxieties by concocting a comforting story of the way things are, a soothing script for his world:

I took heart from the reasonable thought that the ship was like other ships, the men like other men, and that the sea was not likely to keep any special surprises expressly for my discomfiture.

Arrived at that comforting conclusion, I bethought myself of a cigar and went below to get it. . . . And suddenly I rejoiced in the great security of the sea as compared with the unrest of the land, in my choice of that untempted life presenting no disquieting problems, invested with an elementary moral beauty by the absolute straightforwardness of its appeal and by the singleness of its purpose. (11)

Every assumption in this little fantasy falls before the events that follow: the particular character of the ship becomes crucial to her management; the individual characters of his subordinates must be taken into account; the sea has in store a very special surprise for him. Into this false complacency Leggatt intrudes, and his arrival contradicts everything the narrator has been thinking. Suddenly the life of the sea proves to be one of continual unrest, temptation, disquiet—and above all multiple in its nature, devious in its appeal, duplicitous in its purpose.

When Leggatt, as the sea's special surprise for the narrator, climbs on board the parable goes into overdrive. His name suggests an envoy or ambassador, as in a legation. He comes from the *Sephora*, "self-bearer" or that which gives birth to the self. Images of doubleness begin to proliferate: the "sleeping suit" that the narrator lends Leggatt fits perfectly; the narrator calls him "my double" and his own "gray ghost"; their physical similarities are pointed to: "It was, in the night, as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a somber and immense mirror," that as they spoke they would have treated an intruder to "the uncanny sight of a double captain busy talking in whispers with his other self" (14-18). But in what sense is Leggatt a messenger who will aid in the birth of the narrator's selfhood? And to what degree and in what way is he his "double?"

Having stressed the doubleness of the encounter and thus for the attentive reader the potential depth of the association, the narrator admits that in actual personal appearance "He was not a bit like me, really" (17). But it is not the function of a double to provide a simple mirror image of the protagonist, either physically or psychologically. Doubles abound in modernist literature from Dostoevsky through Faulkner and they function chiefly to stress certain propensities of the protagonist, where he might be weak or in what moral or mental direction he might be pointed. In *Crime and Punishment*, which also deals with transgression and its spiritual consequences, Dostoevsky makes brilliant use of his character

Svidrigaylov whose spiritual damnation appears as a vivid warning for the protagonist Raskolnikov, even though the two characters are widely separated in appearance and circumstances. Raskolnikov sees the warning in his double and turns in revulsion from such a future. But what does Leggatt teach the narrator of “The Secret Sharer”? How will he help him find himself?

Leggatt is a failed leader. He has been arrested by his own captain for killing the insubordinate seaman. It may be that few officers would behave as courageously in a crisis (his initiative in setting a reefed foresail saved the *Sephora* from the storm); it may be that knocking down the insubordinate seaman was a necessary step; it may be that Leggatt strangled him in a state of unconsciousness when a huge wave washed over the ship. None of these extenuations changes the fact that he has killed a subordinate and that with the decision of his captain to hold him responsible his career as an officer is over. But, remarkably, Leggatt does not collapse in the face of this adversity. He does not see himself as guilty. Above all he does not hold himself answerable to the law for his action: “My father’s a parson in Norfolk. Do you see me before a judge and jury on that charge? For myself I can’t see the necessity” (14). He sees his act in its circumstances as beyond the understanding of his legal peers and thus as beyond their reach:

“You don’t suppose I am afraid of what can be done to me? Prison or gallows or whatever they may please. But you don’t see me coming back to explain such things to an old fellow in a wig and twelve respectable tradesmen, do you? What can they know whether I am guilty or not—or of *what* I am guilty, either? That’s my affair. What does the Bible say? ‘Driven off the face of the earth.’ Very well. I am off the face of the earth now. As I came at night so I shall go.” (37)

Leggatt by an act of will exempts himself from the judgment of his society. When he leaves the narrator’s ship he becomes radically isolated, like Cain, wandering on the face of the earth, exiled but in possession of *himself*. The narrator watches and learns.

What strikes the narrator as most remarkable is Leggatt’s firmness. He admires his calm, his self-possession, “that something unyielding in his character which was carrying him through so finely,” “the unalterable purpose of his action” (37). This quality may be natural to Leggatt but it was developed during his imprisonment on the *Sephora* after its captain relieved him of his command. He had time then to think through the nature of his action and his degree of responsibility. He came to

the conclusion that he cannot be judged by the “twelve respectable tradesmen” who as an English jury represent the law and the interests of society. Leggatt actually denies that the system can judge him, and this impresses the narrator who had judgment by others so much on his mind before the secret sharer came aboard. And Leggatt’s chosen alienation is a remarkable, modernist, extreme existential gesture: to declare oneself free of social context. Billy Budd couldn’t do it and Captain Vere did not help him. Unlike Billy, Leggatt does not bless his captain. In effect he becomes a unique system unto himself, wandering the face of the earth, and in the process he embodies a critique of the home system, the traditional system of legal precedent and of hierarchical command.

The home system is represented in its blind inertia by Captain Archbold of the *Sephora*. He comes on board the narrator’s vessel seeking the escaped Leggatt. He serves as the representative of established law and order, the conventional system of justice that Leggatt has rejected. Captain Archbold’s chief characteristic is a “spiritless tenacity,” suitable for the embodiment of unimaginative process and procedure, of the *single* point of view. The narrator determines that Archbold has made up his mind not to credit Leggatt for setting the reefed foresail. He claims to have given the order himself and then dutifully passes the credit on to Providence. “God’s own hand in it,” he asserts. The narrator asks:

“You were very anxious to give up your mate to the shore people, I believe?”

He was. To the law. His obscure tenacity on that point had in it something incomprehensible and a little awful: something, as it were, mystical, quite apart from his anxiety that he should not be suspected of “countenancing any doings of that sort.” Seven-and-thirty virtuous years at sea, of which over twenty of immaculate command, and the last fifteen in the *Sephora*, seemed to have laid him under some pitiless obligation. (27)

In his absolute devotion to the prescribed law and in his inability to perceive ethical alternatives, his lack of a metasystem, Archbold represents a kind of degenerate Captain Vere, stripped of the intelligence, passion, and elegance of Melville’s leader. But Leggatt, as we have seen, is no Billy Budd.

It is this Archbold version of justice, mechanical and spiritless, that Leggatt rejects and that he leads the narrator to circumvent. This is no easy matter, involving as it does a kind of existential departure—a departure not just from conventional legal structure but from the cosmic or religious validation that backs it:

Later in the afternoon we had a cautious try at whispering. The Sunday quietness of the ship was against us; the stillness of air and water around her was against us; the elements, the men were against us—everything was against us in our secret partnership; time itself—for this could not go on forever. The very trust in Providence was, I suppose, denied to his guilt. Shall I confess that this thought cast me down very much? And as to the chapter of accidents which counts for so much in the book of success, I could only hope that it was closed. For what favorable accident could be expected? (31)

With the loss of Providence as guide and ally no fortunate accidents can be expected. For Leggatt (a parson's son) and for the narrator and for most sailors in the nineteenth century when the story is set, favorable accidents indicate the care of Providence. Archbold attributes to Providence the successful setting of the reefed foresail by which Leggatt saved his ship. To abandon trust in Providence is to cut oneself loose from a structure of hope and consolation, to feel a cosmic bereavement that can be imagined only distantly by most of us now. In such an isolation, what remains to guide us? What is left? And Leggatt's answer, the answer from the ship *Sephora*, is the inner leadership of the self.

This process of self-creation lies at the heart of the story, and Conrad presents it as an experience of doubling, of finding an alternative nature, of achieving an inner metasytem, an ethic of independence from the conventional socially acknowledged ethos. It isn't easy: "all the time the dual working of my mind distracted me almost to the point of insanity. I was constantly watching myself, my secret self, as dependent on my actions as my own personality, sleeping in that bed, behind that door which faced me as I sat at the head of the table. It was very much like being mad, only it was worse because one was aware of it" (24). But through this duplicity (doubleness) the narrator-captain learns to be firm in his relation with his men. His need to protect Leggatt, the other self that is becoming his metasytem, forces him to show no weakness, no quarter, to his subordinates. He acquires the firmness, the *self-possession* he so much admired in the other. His unremitting preservation of this other self is, to use Leggatt's phrase, his own affair. It teaches him to lead without faltering because faltering would be fatal for his secret sharer.

Learning this lesson interferes with the pleasure of being in command of his ship: "I was not wholly alone with my command; for there was that stranger in my cabin. Or rather, I was not completely and wholly with her. Part of me was absent. That mental feeling of being in two places at once affected me physically as if the

mood of secrecy had penetrated my very soul" (32-33). The comforting script with which he started his narrative is gone, and with it the weaknesses of self-doubt. The narrator is creating a metasytem, represented for a time by Leggatt—his firmness, resolution, and self-trust—but ultimately to be converted by the narrator's own courage into a tested foundation of leadership.

This resolution is fixed by the narrator's desire to see his secret sharer safely off the ship. In order to let Leggatt swim to shore he approaches an island called Kohring and sails under the face of its massive cliff. "It was now a matter of conscience to shave the land as close as possible—for now he must go overboard whenever the ship was put in stays." But the narrator-captain takes his ship in much closer than is necessary, especially given Leggatt's prize-winning swimming power of which much is made when he first comes on board. The closeness to the land is a gift that Leggatt does not need. The narrator also presses on his double some money and a floppy white hat to protect his head from the tropical sun. The reader knows that these gifts are not so much to Leggatt the exile as they are necessary to the narrator as he parts with his double, a kind of acknowledgment of the legacy of leadership that Leggatt will leave behind. In sailing in so close, putatively looking for a land wind, the narrator captain risks his own life, the lives of his men, above all the ship itself. He risks them all for no practical purpose, for no publicly defensible reason. No jury would acquit him of his rashness. As the ship moves in close the chief mate cracks under the strain and the narrator subdues him, subdues him without harming him. He thinks of Leggatt, "perhaps he was able to understand why, on my conscience, it had to be thus close—no less" (42,44). What does he mean, "on my conscience?" To whom does he owe the indefensible risk he chooses to take? The reader must provide an answer to this question and the only answer that remains is that he owes the gesture to himself.

What is strangest in all this may not be the narrator's self-referential choice, but the fact that readers rejoice in it. We rejoice in the thrilling gesture at the end. Why? Because we intuit that something more important than responsible, efficient management is going on. And something more important even than British justice, than trial by jury. We the readers are the privileged "witnesses" and "judges" who haunted the narrator at the beginning of his command. We see in the impractical and dangerous virtuosity something even more important than the safety of the ship: the achievement of a truly creative authority.

At the crucial last moment the narrator tries to determine the direction of the unfamiliar ship in the calm sea. He looks desperately for a sign, for a marker that will give him the knowledge that will save them all. Suddenly he spots his own white

floppy hat on the black water, the hat that had washed off Leggatt's head as he swam away. He sees it drifting forward and knows that the ship has begun to gather stern way. Just in time he gives the order to shift the helm and the ship comes round. The image of system and metasystem could not be more vivid. In order to determine the direction of the home system, the ship, the leader requires reference to a metasystem, the sea as marked by the white hat. And the fact that the hat has been left behind by Leggatt, who has unknowingly served as the narrator's psychological and ethical guide, enables the narrator to succeed as a leader, to incorporate Leggatt's independence and firmness into his single public identity as captain. Having achieved this integration he can say goodbye to his external second self:

Walking to the taffrail . . . I was in time to catch an evanescent glimpse of my white hat left behind to mark the spot where the secret sharer of my cabin and of my thoughts, as though he were my second self, had lowered himself into the water to take his punishment; a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny. (45-46)

And we know as we read this that the narrator himself, having overcome his doubts and fears, will also strike out, will succeed as a leader because he has become whole as a person, as the kind of person who can command. He has incorporated Leggatt's powers with his own in the kind of authoritative integrity that only those who can summon up a private and alternative ethics ever achieve.

### **A Private Ethics of Leadership?**

We grant the narrator-captain our applause because he has earned it, and because we intuit or know from experience the immense discipline and the immense loneliness of leadership. For this reason we more than tolerate the risk he takes with the ship and the crew. But the story does leave behind certain unresolved and perhaps unresolvable ethical questions. Does the narrator have the right to risk all for the sake of his commitment to Leggatt and what Leggatt stands for? Would we applaud his action if we were on board? Does a prospective leader have the right—with all the lifetime of good service before him that might justify, might *pay* for the risk—to endanger without consultation human lives perhaps as worthy as his own? The story leaves these questions behind without addressing them directly, but the implied answer is affirmative. “The Secret Sharer” suggests that there are certain moments in our lives when extravagant, irresponsible gestures become necessary if we are to continue to grow. And beyond this it suggests that true leaders are

expensive in just this way: that they risk the rest of us. Their development necessitates departures from the established ethos, the ethos of Captain Archbold and the conventional ethical coordinates that map out prescribed actions.

The message is elitist and may be dangerously so: that leaders, even prospective leaders, must take for themselves a margin of independence that the rest of us cannot share. This is Raskolnikov's theory at the beginning of *Crime and Punishment* and Dostoevsky puts him through hell for acting on it. But Conrad takes a different view. He seems to be telling us that in the immense play of authority and in its immense ambiguities leaders will find the conventional ethos, the Archbold view of justice, inadequate. It will not be sufficiently flexible, precise, and extreme to cover the radical situations in which leaders function. Leaders must possess an alternative ethos, an ethical metasystem by which to measure the efficacy and perhaps even the justice of the law, of the established home system. There will be moments when the received definition of duty will prescribe the wrong action—Captain Archbold's action, or Captain Vere's—or when it will have nothing to say. But leaders cannot afford to have nothing to say, nowhere to turn. Leaders must act in a single lucid gesture and give an unequivocal command. Leaders can make this single gesture, utter this single command, only if a private self sustains them secretly from within, beyond the order of those conventional systems of prudence and duty that regulate most of our perceived choices.

## Notes

1. For a related discussion of charisma see Raphael Falco, *Charismatic Authority in Early Modern English Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Up, 2000).
2. Joseph Conrad, "The Secret Sharer," *The Portable Conrad*, ed. Michael Gorra (New York: Penguin Classics, 2007), 10, 9.

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**THOMAS VARGISH** teaches literature and film at the United States Air Force Academy. He has published books and essays on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and cultural history. Professor Vargish holds degrees from Columbia, Oxford, Princeton, and Lund universities and has been a Rhodes Scholar and Guggenheim Fellow.